



Indian social entrepreneur wins MBA award and plans to aid poor

► Accrediting body stresses value of business degree in times of recession

By Peter Brown

ON THE DAY Gajender Sharma started his MBA course at HEC, the French business school, another student told him that there was simply no limit to what he could achieve, if he put his mind to it.

The advice stuck. Sharma became president of the school's MBA council and plunged himself into a huge array of extra-curricular activities, somehow fitting them around the testing workload that comes with any MBA. His reward came last Thursday, when a group of his classmates from Paris were in London to see him voted MBA Student of the Year at a gala dinner.

The competition, run jointly by *The Independent* and the Association of MBAs (Amba), is in its 11th year. It is designed to highlight the value of the MBA, both to businesses and to individuals looking to broaden their knowledge or step into new areas. Academic achievement is vital – but the judges, headed this year by Hilary Sears, chair of the association's International Management Board, look for something extra.

Amba now has 155 accredited business schools in 69 countries with over 500 accredited programmes and a total membership of 9,000. The

finalists are nominated from students at accredited business schools and this year 58 schools entered. Many were nominating a student for the first time, a sign that the association is casting its net ever wider.

"In times of recession the MBA market tends to do quite well," said Jeanette Purcell, Amba's chief executive. "People who are feeling insecure about their job or their career

prospects choose to take an MBA to give them a better chance in the market." Recession, however, carries a sting in its tale. When today's students graduate some might struggle to find a job, she warned.

Anticipating those problems, Amba is gearing up its alumni services. "When times are tough the association's support to students in terms of networking, jobs and career services is an even more valuable resource."

Jo Redfern, of *The Independent*, presented the prizes to the winner and three runners-up, Kagisho Mahura, Tony Sadownichik and Mamta Singhai.

Mahura, 35, did his MBA at Stellenbosch Business School, in South Africa, where he was class representative. In 2006, competing with two colleagues against 28 American schools, Mahura won the National Black MBA Association Case Competition, held in Atlanta, Georgia.

He is chief executive of Bomang Capital, an investment company and is building a wealth management business aimed at South Africa's "grossly under-serviced black affluent market".

He knows the strains an MBA can bring: "While I was studying we had a baby and I started a new job, which put my wife Pheladi under tremendous pressure."

Sadownichik, 48, completed Rotterdam School of Management's executive OneMBA programme, where he started a leadership panel on sustainability and economic growth. He grew up in Vancouver, Canada and has gone from identifying mining, fishing and forestry opportunities for KPMG, the accountants, to integrating economic perspectives into sustainability

strategies with Greenpeace.

The MBA helped Sadownichik pioneer Greenpeace's entry this year to the European Space Agency consortium, which monitors the global environment. Greenpeace is the first NGO to have gained such a voice.

Singhai, 28, finishes her executive MBA this December at Strathclyde Business School – which is convenient, as she also teaches engineering at Strathclyde University. She recently won a Women's Engineering Society Prize.

Born in Massachusetts to parents of Indian origin, she was brought up in Scotland. Describing herself as a "citizen of the world", she believes diversity "does not dilute our identity but simply enhances it".

As a child she saw discrimination against immigrants and grew determined never to be disadvantaged. Her MBA, she says, has helped boost her confidence in all areas of business.

THE WINNER Gajender Sharma

As a schoolboy in India, Gajender Sharma often had to wait a week before his parents could afford to buy him a book. Only as a teenager did he begin to realise the difficulties they had faced. "I wanted to perform well, but we had this financial constraint," he says. "It was a struggle. In my case there was a one-week delay for a book – but what about the children who didn't go to school at all? Education can totally change someone's life. Access to it should not be dependent on the economic situation of the family."

With that vision firmly in mind, Sharma, this year's Independent MBA



Student of the Year, is setting up an organisation called Positive Drive. The idea, he says, is to help children around the world who don't have access to education by building a model so that their parents can get small jobs. "It's about motivating the professionals who have the contacts," he says.

Sharma, aged 34 and married, graduated this year from HEC in Paris, where he was president of the MBA council. In the role he managed to raise £20,000, creating two new professional clubs and developing a networking partnership. He also organised a two-day Net Impact conference on corporate social responsibility, and won leadership, marketing and branding awards.

While in Paris, Sharma also got the chance to perform in two short films. He likes listening to music and singing.

Before the course he had studied mechanical engineering in Delhi. He then spent five years working in Japan, where he learnt the language and introduced Indian culture - including cooking - to the Japanese.

He is still based in Tokyo, where he lives with his wife Rekha, and is now an associate consultant with A.T. Kearney.

"The MBA teaches you finance, strategy and marketing," he says. "It also gives you a lot of confidence - and allows you to build a network. If I have a problem now, I call my friends and someone will always know the answer."





Sharma and guests at the awards ceremony in London